

Title: “[My counselor] knows stuff about me, but [my natural mentor] actually knows me”:  
Distinguishing characteristics of youth’s natural mentoring relationships

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Abstract: Adults play important roles in the lives of adolescents, serving as role models, sources of social support, and providers of social capital. Natural mentoring relationships (NMRs), relationships between adults and youth that rise to a level of significance for the youth, have a positive impact on youth outcomes in a number of academic, socioemotional, and health related areas. Yet despite the importance of NMRs to youth development, there is little research on *how* NMRs develop or what factors are associated with a relationship *becoming* an NMR. This study uses in-depth qualitative interviews with adolescents across five time points to explore the characteristics of youth-adult relationships that develop into NMRs, and the psychosocial processes and actions which transform a naturally occurring relationship into an NMR. Findings from our study suggest that by intentionally using time and space with youth as an opportunity to cultivate safe and authentic spaces and build trust, adults can encourage the development of NMRs with adolescents.

Despite cultural narratives emphasizing adolescent peer culture and the diminishing influence of adults on teens, research shows that adults play important roles in the lives of adolescents, serving as role models, sources of social support, and providers of social capital (see Chu et al., 2010). Zeldin and colleagues state that youth-adult relationships are “a foundation from which youth can be active agents in their own development, the development of others, and the development of the community” (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O’Connor, 2005, p. 2). Thus, a pressing question for the field is how can we better understand these relationships in order to create and sustain them in the everyday lives of adolescents. Natural mentoring relationships (NMRs; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002) can be considered one subset of the larger category of supportive adult relationships. Natural mentors have been defined in the literature as “nonparental adults, such as extended family members, teachers, or neighbors, from whom a young person receives support and guidance as a result of a relationship developed without the help of a program specifically designed to connect youth and adults to form such a relationship (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005; pg 143).” Natural mentors are distinct from formal mentors, but also from parents, and are unique in that youth *choose* to engage in these relationships, which are formed organically over time. Yet there is little information about the process of how these relationships form or, within the broad ecologies of relationships in youth’s lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017), what factors elevate some day-to-day relationships to the status of natural mentoring relationships. The present study utilizes longitudinal qualitative interview data with adolescents to examine the characteristics of NMRs, in an attempt to understand how everyday relationships become NMRs. In particular, we assess the psychosocial processes and actions that transform youths’ relationships with non-parental adults into NMRs. Previous analysis of a subset of one

time point of this data for youth who nominated teachers as their significant adults identified the characteristics of those relationships that youth felt differentiated teachers who rose to the level of a significant adult for them (reference blinded for review). This analysis builds on those initial results to look across relationships and contexts for a more complete picture of how these relationships unfold within the full ecology of youth lives.

We are guided by ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and relational developmental systems (Overton, 2015) theories. We consider youth-adult relationships as microsystems, settings with specific features that promote positive development. We also consider the influence of the microsystem in which the relationship occurs and the ways in which relationships that cross microsystems (i.e., the mesosystems; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) may differ from relationships within a single microsystem (e.g., a teacher who a youth only sees in school versus a teacher who also attends a youth's place of worship). We take mutually influencing individual  $\leftrightarrow$  context processes (Ford & Lerner, 1992) as a key starting point from which to approach understanding NMRs. This means that we assume that both youth and adults have agency and influence on the development and maintenance of the relationship, leading to an interactive dynamic wherein the relationship is both influencing and being influenced by the actions of the youth and the actions of the adult.

### **Youth-Adult Relationships in Adolescence**

#### **Prevalence and Outcomes**

Over the course of adolescence, primary sources of social support often shift from parents and other adults to peers (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Yet non-parental adults are uniquely suited to provide both the informal companionship typical of peer relationships and some of the structure of parental relationships (see Hirsch, 2005). Thus, their “in-between” nature may be

developmentally supportive during adolescence. Further, they may play a bridging role, linking youth to the adult world or to forms of social capital that youth may not be exposed or have access to through other sources (Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010). A large body of literature points to the developmental benefits of relationships with supportive nonparental adults, indicating that such relationships promote positive outcomes for youth across a number of domains (e.g., Rhodes & Roffman, 2003; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). Further, young people who have multiple strong relationships with adults across the contexts of their lives do better than youth with fewer such relationships (Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017; Varga & Zaff, 2018).

While supportive adults are important overall, researchers have also differentiated those adults to whom youth ascribe status as an important or significant adult as being particularly influential. In fact, research on formal mentoring indicates that mentoring relationships are effective only when youth identify their mentor as a significant adult in their lives (Dubois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002). It is this status, as a significant adult (i.e., very important person, or VIP), that we consider when we refer to natural mentoring relationships (NMR). Thus, natural mentors, in our view, differ from other adults in a youth's network in that they reach a level of significance, as defined by the youth, that not all adults obtain.

Researchers have consistently found that the majority of adolescents report the presence of an important adult, or NMR, in their lives (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a), although exact numbers for youth growing up in the United States today are difficult to assess due to a lack of representative samples and the historical nature of secondary data. NMRs are associated with a host of positive outcomes, including improved educational, vocational, behavioral, and psychosocial outcomes (Hurd,

Sanchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; McDonald & Lambert, 2014; Miranda-Chan, Fruith, Dubon, & Wray-Lake, 2016). Youth with NMRs show higher levels of academic engagement, attainment, aspirations, and grades (Chang et al., 2010; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018; Hurd & Sellers, 2013; McDonald & Lambert, 2014; Miranda-Chan et al., 2016). These youth spend more time volunteering, are more likely to become natural mentors themselves (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018), and report higher quality relationships with others, particularly closer friendships (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018; Miranda-Chan et al., 2016). Further, adolescents receive assistance from their natural mentors in coping and report lower levels of depression and anxiety and higher self-esteem (Chang et al., 2010; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b; Haddad et al., 2011; Hurd, Stoddard, Bauermeister, & Zimmerman, 2014).

### **Development of Relationships**

Researchers have identified some processes that appear to support the development of mentoring relationships. Mentors' genuine affection for and ability to be authentic with mentees promotes both initiation and maintenance of relationships (Ahrens, DuBois, Garrison, Spencer, Richardson, & Lozano, 2011). Mentor authenticity and frequency of contact fosters relational closeness and trust, which impact mentoring's effects on adolescents' psychological well-being (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a). Donlan, McDermott, and Zaff (2017) developed the TRICS model, which identified five features that promoted relational development between mentors and youth within group contexts: The right who, Respect, Information gathering, Consistency, and Support. Together, these features appeared to promote trust within the relationship as well as positive outcomes for youth. In a study of youth-initiated mentoring, Spencer and colleagues (2016) found that youth who seek NMRs look for adults who they perceive as consistent, reliable, and who share their interests (Ahrens et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2016). Youth reported

that having a mentor from their own community facilitated trust in the relationship, and made the mentor's guidance and advice feel more meaningful. NMRs, therefore, were associated with more positive outcomes if youth perceived their mentor to be similar to themselves (Spencer et al., 2016), making youth's views of these relationships critical to understand.

Whereas there is overall less research on how relationships develop than on the characteristics of those relationships (discussed below) the Search Institute (Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017) has conducted extensive work to document both the characteristics of supportive relationships and the actions that are associated with those characteristics from the point of view of youth. They call these "developmental relationships," or relationships that help young people thrive, and their work lends insight into how such relationships may be fostered. They identify five elements of developmental relationships: Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power, Expand Possibilities. Each element encompasses a set of three to five actions through which those elements are expressed within relationships. They include actions such as listening and being dependable, holding youth accountable and expecting their best, empowering and advocating, respecting and collaborating, and inspiring and connecting. Importantly, the framework highlights that a variety of types of relationships can be developmental, and that it is these key actions and elements that make those relationships powerful drivers of development.

### **Characteristics of Relationships**

Studies of formal mentoring have revealed characteristics of relationships that are associated with better outcomes for youth. These include closeness characterized by mutuality, trust, and identification (Rhodes, 2005) and attunement (Pryce, 2012). It is commonly held that higher quality mentoring relationships are more effective and that quality depends on closeness

(Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005). Some researchers have pushed back on the necessity of closeness, pointing to the effectiveness of some shorter-term, more instrumental relationships (Cavell & Elledge, 2014; McQuillin, Strait, Smith, & Ingram, 2015). Thus, mentoring relationships may serve different purposes for youth, and the necessary components of effective mentoring relationships may differ across contexts or goals.

Effective NMRs are often characterized by collaborative construction of the parameters of the relationship (e.g., purpose, activities) by mentors and mentees (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Spencer, 2012). Natural mentors can include teachers, family members, coaches, bosses, religious leaders, and others. Around 50% of natural mentors are family members and 25% are school-based (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005a). Overall, natural mentors often come from similar backgrounds as their mentees (Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2011; Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2016). Relationships with nonfamilial natural mentors have been associated with better educational and health outcomes (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a; Hurd, Stoddard, Bauermeister & Zimmerman, 2014), leading scholars to posit that nonfamilial adults are able to connect youth with increased social capital and offer alternative perspectives that make them more effective than familial mentors (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a). At the same time, research on the NMRs of Black youth by Hurd and colleagues (2013) revealed that youth tended to have more connected relationships with familial than non-familial natural mentors.

Despite the importance of NMRs to youth development, there is little research on *how* NMRs develop or what factors are associated with a relationship *becoming* an NMR. Scholars have called for studies across settings and types of relationships to better understand processes within relationships occurring in youth's daily lives (Darling, Hamilton, & Shaver, 2006). Given the importance of youth's perspectives on outcomes including social support (Sterrett et al.,

2011) and NMRs (Spencer et al., 2016), understanding these processes from youth's perspectives is key. Further, as they age youth have increasing agency over the relationships in which they invest. Thus, knowing more about why and how adolescents select into NMRs is important.

### **This Study**

This study bridges gaps in the current literature through in-depth qualitative research that looks across contexts and relationships. We investigate the question: what are the characteristics of youth-adult relationships that develop into NMRs and what, if any, patterns of psychosocial processes and actions appear to promote relational development in such relationships?

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

This study is part of a larger, longitudinal, mixed methods study of NMRs. The study began with a survey of 289 adolescents ages 12-18 recruited from after-school programs, community settings, and schools in a mid-sized community in the southeastern United States. We combined purposeful and random sampling techniques to select 41 youth for the longitudinal study (see reference blinded for details of sampling strategy). At time 1, we purposefully selected half of the sample to be in middle school and half in high school, with each age group evenly split by gender. This sampling frame was chosen to allow us to follow these relationships across two key transitions points in adolescence (middle to high school and high school to post-secondary life) as well as to allow us to look at the ways that developmental differences across early to middle to late adolescence (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019) may shape the ways in which youth perceive and draw on relationships with adults. We looked across the sample to ensure a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Within each age group, we sampled for a range of different relational styles (i.e., scores on attachment related



measures of anxiety and avoidance in relationships), purposefully selecting from the outer quartiles and randomly selecting from the mean quartiles. We also checked the sample for a range of participation rates in extracurricular activities and reports of NMRs in their lives (which ranged from 0-5 in the screening survey sample) within each age group and relational style profile. At time 1 the sample included 22 females and 19 males. A majority of the youth ( $n = 32$ ) identified as White. Four youth identified as Black, three as multiracial, and two as Latinx. The participants ranged in ages from 12-17 (mean = 14.58) and 17% were eligible for free and/or reduced-price lunch. At time five, 31 youth participated in the interview ( $n = 16$  females). Twenty-five of the participants identified as White, two as Black, two as multiracial, and two as Latinx. At time five participants' ages ranged from 16-20 (mean = 17.4). Thirteen percent of the time five sample was eligible for free and/or reduced-price lunch.

### **Procedures**

Youth were surveyed and interviewed approximately every six months for just over three years, resulting in up to five time points of data for each youth. Youth received gift cards for participating in each survey and interviews and were also mailed movie gift certificates on their birthday every year as a retention strategy. Thirty youth were surveyed and interviewed at all five time points. Of the remaining ten, the majority were interviewed two or three times, with two youth interviewed only once. For this study, we draw on the longitudinal interview data. One youth was omitted from the sample because he did not name any VIPs. Two youth were omitted because they were only interviewed once and therefore their data did not allow us to look at the development of their NMR's. Five additional youth were only interviewed twice, at either times one and two or times one and five. These five youth were omitted from the sample for this paper because times one to two represented a single year, and time five's interview focused mainly on

reflection on all their VIP relationships from across the study. Thus, these five youth did not have in-depth data on the development of their VIP relationships over time. The final sample for this paper, then, was 33. During the first interview, all youth chose their own pseudonyms, which are used throughout this paper. Interviews were semi-structured and focused primarily on youth's relationships with adults. In each interview, youth were provided with a definition of a significant adult (i.e., VIP; Beam, Chen & Greenberger, 2002) as "persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices you make." They were asked if they had someone like that in their lives. If they did, they were asked a series of questions about that adult and their relationship. Follow-up questions included: tell me a story about [adult]; how did you meet; what do you usually do together; was there ever a time when you were not close and if so, how did you get closer; is your relationship with [adult] different from relationships with other adults, if so, how and why do you think that is. If they did not have a VIP, they were asked if they had someone like that in the past and about any adults in their lives who they could imagine becoming significant. At subsequent interviews youth could nominate the same VIP, a different VIP, or no VIP. If they nominated a different VIP, follow-up questions were also asked about their prior VIP. In the final interview (time five), youth were asked to reflect back on all their VIP relationships discussed in the study. Across all 41 youth in the sample, the number of VIPs youth reported across the study ranged from 0 to 5, with a mean of 2.4; for the 33 youth in this sample the range was 1 to 5, with a mean of 2.8.

## **Analysis**

All interviews were professionally transcribed, checked for accuracy by researchers on our team, and uploaded into Dedoose (2018), a web-based software which facilitates qualitative

and mixed methods data analysis. Interviews were coded for organizational codes reflecting the major research questions of the project (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Two trained researchers coded each transcript and then compared and came to consensus on their coding (Hill et al., 2005). For this paper, we followed a multi-phase process of analysis. First, we exported from Dedoose all data coded for each youth-VIP relationship identified by the 33 youth in the sample, compiling all data on each relationship into its own document. Data were color coded by time point and organized into sections reflecting whether the youth was discussing the initiation, maintenance, ending, or impact of the relationship. Next, we developed a set of codes reflecting ecological (e.g., presence of other youth) and individual (e.g., sharing personal information) level processes and influences on the relationships and analyzed each relationship profile for the presence of these factors. Because we retained the color coding for time point and divided the data by stage of the relationship, we were able to examine the themes as they occurred longitudinally – over time for the youth as well as for the relationship. Finally, a narrative summary was written for each relationship. This resulted in a total of 93 relational profiles – one for each of the VIPs nominated by the 33 youth. As noted in the description of methods, above, the range of profiles per youth was 1 (n=1) to 5 (n=1), with most youth having two or three relational profiles (mean=2.8).

The first two authors independently read each profile for emergent themes related to the initiation and development of relationships. We compared the themes we saw in the data, came to consensus on three salient themes (time & space, roles & contexts, safe & authentic spaces), and discussed these with the other authors to confirm their validity (Hill et al., 2005). It was at this time that the authors agreed to include barriers to relational development as a significant factor for analysis, as it emerged repeatedly in the data. The first two authors read each relational

profile again, focusing on these themes as well as patterns of and barriers to relational development. During this step, trust emerged as salient and was added as a fourth theme.

## Results

We identified four domains related to the development and maintenance of the NMRs in our study: 1) time and space for forming and maintaining the relationship; 2) VIPs' roles and the contexts of relationships; 3) trust between youth and VIP, and; 4) the relationship as a safe and authentic space for youth to express themselves. Within each domain, different themes arose within specific relationships, but there were commonalities across the relationships as well.

### Time and Space

It may seem obvious to say that time and space for a relationship to develop is critical. Indeed, across the youth, spending time with VIPs was named as an important foundation for their relationships. Time and space was necessary for the initiation of relationships, but also supported relational development over time. A number of youth talked about becoming closer to family members when they moved nearer to each other. VIPs or youth moving or becoming too busy to spend time together were frequent reasons for relationships ending or growing less close over time. Scotter's comparison of how close he feels to a new VIP as compared to a VIP he nominated at an earlier time point sums up this common theme: "I feel closer to [VIP 2] because I'd see her way more often and [VIP 1] I'd see once every couple weeks."

**Intentional use of time and space.** It does not appear to be the presence of time and space alone that fosters the development of NMRs. Youth's descriptions of relationships that became significant suggest that those adults were able to *intentionally make and/or capitalize on time and space* to grow the relationship, such as a coach who used long runs to talk about the youth's life. Scooter noted that while it was his advisor's "job to make sure that I'm succeeding

and doing everything that I can in school,” she “takes it to another level” and “checks with me about other things in school, my personal life, how I’m doing, all that stuff.” These adults used the context of their relationships with youth to make space for talking about other issues. For youth who nominated the same VIP across more than one time point, the influence of this intentionality on the development of the relationship was at times apparent in youth’s report of how their VIP leveraged particular events. For example, across the years Carrie and her VIP went on mission trips together with the youth group which had provided the initial context for their relationship. Time together on these trips, and the VIP’s intentionally reaching out to support Carrie on these trips, appeared to help sustain their relationship.

Youth appeared less likely than adults to intentionally make time and space for the relationship. The exception was youth reporting that they did and/or could intentionally go to the adult to seek support when needed, such as going to a teacher VIP’s classroom or texting a VIP when they needed something. Yet this kind of reaching out appeared to be more linked to specific youth needs than to the kind of generalized aim of building the relationship.

**Physical vs. virtual presence.** We may think of time and space as being present together physically. Yet for some youth, *psychological time and space* could be just as impactful. For example, Time had two VIPs whom she connected with primarily through long letters and/or emails. One of these relationships devolved when the VIP stopped writing back regularly, leading Time to realize that she could not trust him to respond. Whereas she rates her closeness to this VIP a 4 at Time 1, by Time 2 he has dropped to a 2, and after that he varies between 1 and 1.5. At Time 4, she says that they had a “rare” back and forth of emails, and while she notes that his emails were entertaining, she also acknowledges that she has lowered her standards for him and that his lack of responsiveness prevents them from being closer. By the end of the study,

Time says she expects the relationship to “fizzle” completely. This is different from the other VIP with whom she communicates primarily through letters, to whom she consistently rates her closeness as a 4 or 5 over time. She and this VIP write long, personal letters to each other. When she is younger, Time says she feels more comfortable opening up to this VIP via letters than in person, although she also acknowledges the effort that the VIP makes to spend time together when they are visiting. By Time 4, she reports her in person visits with the VIP as being more comfortable. Thus, virtual presence could sustain and even develop relationships when the VIP was active in communicating and keeping up the connection, but responsiveness is key, and even these relationships which were primarily virtual began with an initial in-person connection.

Although Time was in middle school when her relationships began via letters and emails, in general, psychological time and space appeared more salient as youth aged. For youth who were transitioning out of high school, VIPs were often not as physically present. Thus, across the time points of the study, it was not uncommon for the amount of time that youth spent in the physical presence of VIPs from earlier in the study to decrease. Yet the sense that the VIP was there for them even if they did not see or speak with them frequently, was important (reference blinded for review). Youth and VIPs also capitalized on technology to create virtual shared space, such as youth communicating with coaches by text in the off-season.

Overall, the youth's just *knowing the VIP is there for them* appeared across the majority of relationships and was a common way of describing why the relationship was important. This could be because of a history of consistency in the relationship, such as when Drew says about his grandfather: “outside of my parents, he's like the only adult figure that's been consistently there.” For other youth, this feeling came from a trust of the adult based on their behaviors or characteristics. Trust was a theme that came up repeatedly and will be discussed further below.

**Time and space as a barrier to relational development.** There were a number of factors that youth noted as barriers to their relationships or impacting how close they felt to the VIP. These factors often affected the amount of time that the VIP had available to the youth. One of the most frequent issues was a *lack of time and space*. This often began with physical time and space, the lack of which resulted in a perception of decreased psychological time and space. Sometimes a VIP or youth moving ended the relationship. Other times, youth just viewed decreased time and space as preventing them from getting closer. Claire, for example, says “I feel like if I’d see [my aunt] more often that we would be closer. I know her a lot, but I don’t know her everyday life and stuff.” Youth’s relationships with VIPs who were teachers often dissipated once the youth no longer had the VIP as a teacher. Without the shared time and space of the classroom, it was hard to maintain connection. Thus, teacher VIPs often fell off of youth’s VIP lists, or at a minimum decreased in closeness, over time. People getting busy was also a common barrier to relationships developing or continuing. Both youth and adults had new responsibilities and roles that prevented them from spending more time together. For youth, this was often linked to increased activities and responsibilities with age; as youth got older, they often were juggling more activities and/or work and reported having less time to connect with their VIPs. For adults, this was often due to changes in jobs and family life.

Related to this, the *VIPs having their own families, especially their own children*, was noted by a number of youth as affecting their relationship. This was related to time and space in that the VIP’s family was often seen as limiting the time the VIP had available for the youth. For example, when describing how her relationship with her VIP has changed since a prior time point, Katherine notes both physical distance and the VIP’s having her own child as factors that have made it more difficult to sustain the relationship: “Well, she’s really busy, so if we’re in

town... we'll ask if she's there, but she just had a baby, so sometimes she'll be busy." Yet at her next interview, Katherine mentions that her VIP made an effort to maintain the relationship despite the distance and her new baby: "She wants me to come and see [where she works]. And she wants me to be in her daughter's life more because she wants me to be kind of what she was to me for her daughter." Claire notes that when she was younger she was the only child in the extended family, so she had the attention of her aunt, who is her VIP, which appeared to contribute to that relationship's development. Cecilia mentions one of her VIPs not having her own children as a factor that makes it easier to see her when she wants to, which is different from some of her other VIPs who have their own families and thus may be less available to Cecilia.

### **Roles and Contexts**

NMRs varied in whether they occurred within or across contexts. We define contexts based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) notion of microsystems, the environments in which people interact and development occurs. These include school, extracurricular activities, and faith-based institutions, as well as families and families' social networks. It was not the case that youth only named adults as VIPs who they interacted with in multiple contexts of their lives. Yet some youth did describe relationships that operated across microsystems; for those youth, the presence of the adult across microsystems could strengthen the relationship. For example, Michael, Swagballer, and Philishaqueesha all had VIPs who they interacted with both at school or in sports and in church. There were also a number of youth who named VIPs who played multiple roles within the same context, such as a teacher who was also a coach for a school-based sports team. Having multiple roles within a context also appears to provide important opportunities for relational development.



Even for youth whose NMRs existed in a single microsystem, which was most common amongst school-based adults, the relationships sometimes appeared to include a *virtual or psychological cross-context aspect*. For example, Skylar, who named two teachers as VIPs at different time points, only interacted with those teachers within their classrooms. Yet she shared a love of soccer with both teachers, and frequently talked with them about soccer, and her life outside the classroom, giving the teachers a *feeling* of existing across contexts. This appears to let youth feel “seen” across contexts and like the adult is validating multiple aspects of their identities, rather than only that aspect that was salient in the setting in which they interacted. Similarly, Lizzie talked about how her VIP, a teacher, provided support to her in myriad areas, even though they only interacted in the classroom:

[VIP’s] very compassionate and kind. And she doesn’t just teach, she didn’t just teach me English, she taught me different life lessons last year, and she helped me through different things that I was struggling with towards the end of the year.

It was common for youth to name VIPs who were family members ( $n=17$  youth, 25 VIPs) or who had connections to their family in some way ( $n=12$  youth, 20 VIPs). These relationships tended to be sustained longer than other types of NMRs. Family-connected VIPs were family friends, parents’ co-workers, or knew the family through a shared context, such as church. The VIP knowing the youth’s family could foster a closer relationship with the youth. When describing her relationship with her youth group leader, who her parents knew through church, Carrie says: “We went together on a mission trip last summer. And my mom went and they were dorm partners, so they bonded and then I bonded because of my mom’s close relationship.” A year later Carrie describes how her relationship with her VIP grew, partially because of the VIP’s connection to her mother but also because Carrie had time alone with her:

We started getting closer, I think, after my second mission trip because my parents weren't with me, and my mom told [VIP], "Hey, she has anxiety," and everything, so [VIP] just started investing a lot of attention and everything because she was worried about me, and we just grew closer after that.

Thus, both the connection to her mother and the opportunity to forge an affiliation with the VIP without the presence of her parents were important to the relationship's development.

**Roles and contexts as barriers to relational development.** Sometimes demographic characteristics of the VIP were named as barriers to the relationship or as constraining what the youth would talk about with the VIP. These factors, which are related to the roles that VIP's play in youth's lives, included age (i.e., generational divides) and gender of the VIP. For example, when describing his relationship with his aunt, Bodos said he would rate her 4.5 out of 5 on closeness and explained why she wasn't a 5:

[S]he's a girl so there's just some stuff that I just can't talk about with her...it would just be awkward to talk about those other things with her because she's a girl. I'd much rather talk about them with my dad.

Another barrier noted by some youth was the *context of the relationship constraining what youth can talk to the VIP about*. This was particularly notable in school-based relationships. Youth frequently said that the VIP being a teacher or the relationship occurring in the school restricted the topics that the youth felt they could address with the VIP, even when the VIP expressed interest in their life outside of school. The exception to this was school-based coaches, with whom youth did not appear to feel the same constraints as with other school-based adults.

Importantly, feeling as if there are limits on what a youth could or would talk to a VIP about is not necessarily a bad thing. Most of the youth who reported not talking to a particular

VIP about personal things, or there being limits on the topics they would talk about because of the context of the relationship, named three to five VIPS over the course of the study. Some of them, such as Bodos, Riley, and Philishaqueesha, were youth with fairly extensive networks of support (Varga & Zaff, 2018). Thus, these youth may have been able to purposefully activate individual relationships with their environments to meet particular needs.

## **Trust**

Trust appeared to be key for youth in their descriptions of why they felt that their VIP relationships were important to them. Trust was mentioned by just over a third of the youth ( $n=15$ ) in their narratives about their VIP relationships. Five of those youth talked about trust multiple times. When describing the role of trust in comparison to closeness in relationships with adults, Conor said: "I think trust probably develops a little slower than closeness would, but I'd say it catches up...I think that you need to get to know them before you can trust them."

Narratives about trust included youth feeling that their VIP trusted them as well as that they could trust their VIP. While this was not universal, some youth explicitly noted that the VIP would share information with them about their own lives. This seemed to increase the youth's sense of being able to trust the VIP, since the VIP was trusting them. For example, when describing his relationship with his drama teacher, a VIP whom he refers to as a "second mom," Bodos says: "I mean she's also very open to me. It's not like she's just telling me 'oh tell me about you, tell me about you, tell me about you.' She actually tells me about her." This mutuality is also linked to VIPs interacting with youth as equals, discussed further below.

Trust often emerged in response to the behaviors or characteristics of the adults. McMolnakerson's boss was significant to him in part because, although she never asked about his life, she trusted him with responsibilities and treated him like an adult. Bodos discussed how

his trust in his VIP grew: "I wouldn't tell her about my family troubles and she would know not to ask. But then as time progressed, I would tell her anything pretty much because I know I can trust her..." For some youth, particularly those who interacted with their VIPs in group settings, the VIP's treating people equally and/or holding people accountable was important for building trust. For example, Johnny talked about how his coach stood up for students:

He'll stand up for you, and he's an authoritative figure in stuff he does, so he doesn't like to be in the sidelines watching. If someone is picking on someone else on the...team, he'll stand up and tell them to stop and get them to quit or whatever... he holds people accountable for what they do.

This kind of behavior demonstrated to Johnny that the coach was trustworthy.

**Trust as a barrier to relational development.** *Not being able to trust* a VIP was noted as a barrier to relationships. For example, Time learned that she could not trust her VIP to respond to her emails and Robert said that the most difficult thing about his relationship with his VIP was that he couldn't trust him to do things.

### **Safe and Authentic Spaces**

Although VIPs were discussed with varying degrees of closeness in terms of the level of support they provided or the types of things that youth would talk about with them, the youth feeling safe with the VIP and reporting that the VIP created an authentic space for the youth to express themselves seemed nearly universal. Key to this was that these relationships provided a space where youth could "be themselves." Philishaqueesha, captured this idea as it was expressed by many of his peers when he said the following about his soccer coach:

With most other adults, I have to act all adulty with them. But with him, I can just like act like myself and not really have to act any different than I usually do.... Because I know

that he respects me and like he accepts how I am. So, I don't have to worry about being any different with him.

Youth talked about safe and authentic spaces in different ways, but there were commonalities across youth in the actions they reported that VIPs took to make them feel that way. First, many of the youth discussed how the adults *treated them as peers*. This sometimes meant the VIP treating the youth like an adult and other times meant the VIP acting more like a friend. Nothing talked about how her VIP, a lacrosse coach, was younger than other adults and that meant that “she wasn't so much like a coach, but more like a friend to us.” McMolnakerson, on the other hand, appreciated that one of his VIP's, a co-worker, “instead of treating me like a dumb 19-year-old, he treats me like an adult.... I don't really know how to explain it. He just treats me like an adult rather than a teenager.” Similarly, when reflecting back on an earlier VIP relationship with a teacher, Bob described the relational dynamics as follows:

There's a degree of making you feel equal to him, as opposed to just a hi—teacher or something. There's not a hierarchy or a divide or anything like that... it's very encouraging because you realize if this person's willing to you know come down to where I am, it just makes you feel much more mobilized upward, I guess.

Many youth talked about their VIP *genuinely listening, asking questions* about their lives, and *responding in a non-judgmental manner*. For example, Lucy says that she can talk to her VIP “because I can say anything I want to and I know she won't judge me. Or she'll think it's funny. But other adults, I just don't feel as comfortable being myself.” In a later interview she reiterates this, noting “I know I can always say anything because she won't judge me and I can joke around with her because she gets me.” Drew emphasizes that his VIP “actually asks me about me. Rather than just talking about himself, or me having to tell him about me. He always is

actually concerned.” Sometimes the sense that they could talk to and get support from the VIP was buttressed by aspects of the VIP’s personality, such as a sense of humor or being “calming.”

VIPs truly listening to youth, and doing so respectfully, is put in context by Nicole, who describes why one of her former VIPs, who she says now “belittles” her, is no longer a VIP:

Because I feel like she just doesn’t try to talk to us or know what’s going on in our lives...so I feel like we just don’t connect on things as well. Like sometimes when we’re in person, yeah we can laugh and do this or that, but at the end of the day I know she’s going to go about her way and we’re going to go about ours, and that’s it.

This disconnect is a stark difference from the descriptions of existing VIP relationships, where adults were noted to take a genuine interest in youth’s lives.

VIPs also often *noticed and acknowledged youth’s individual needs*. Drew, for example, appreciated that his coach noticed and responded when he was going through a difficult time:

He was really good, at that time, because that was also when my parents were getting divorced, so I was kinda down and stuff, and he was really perceptive to anything I would say in practice. Like, if I was trying to ask questions about what I should do, or say could we do this, or whatever. And, he gave me a real chance, and that really helped pick up my spirits, even if it was just football. During that time, it was a big deal for me.

Reflective of this ability to see and meet youth’s needs, it was common for youth to use words such as understanding, caring, or helpful when describing their VIP.

Youth also described how these adults *validated* them and made them feel special, important, or like they mattered. These adults validated the youth’s self and identity. In some cases, this went beyond general understanding of the youth to really *seeing the youth’s authentic self*. Swagballer summarized this when describing the difference between two of her VIPs: “[VIP

1] knows stuff about me, but [VIP 2] actually knows me.” Similarly, Lizzie says the following about her grandmother, whom she named as her VIP at multiple points: “other adults have to figure out what’s wrong. My grandma automatically knows what’s wrong...I guess that just sets my grandma apart from every person.” In a later interview, she expanded on this:

She’s also always been very open to listening to what I have to say. She’s always been very caring. She also knows what I’m like when I’m not prepared to be in front of a lot of people. So she kind of, in a way, knows more of my true self when I’m just around my family and not really around other people.

Related to the idea of validating youth’s identity, was youth *seeing the VIP as a role model*, something that was common in youth’s narratives. Sometimes this was related to seeing similarities between themselves and the VIP. Time saw herself in her aunt, who she described as a smart and non-conformist woman. Some youth saw the adult as an aspirational role model, someone they would like to be like when they got older or a role model of what an adult should be. For example, Carrie describes her VIP as “an amazing person” who “makes you want to be a better person” and “a role model...of how to live your life” and Robert says:

Because that’s kind of like what I would look to be when I’m his age, have two little kids running around. And just, he’s such a great guy, you know. He just interacts with them a lot and, yeah, that’s just kind of who I’d like to be.

### **Discussion**

Across the youth in our study, four major factors emerged as key to the development and maintenance of natural mentoring relationships (NMRs). These were: 1) time and space; 2) roles and contexts; 3) trust, and; 4) safe and authentic space. Some of these are intertwined, as trust is intricately linked to the idea of safe and authentic space. It is also important to note that none of

these factors are particularly surprising if we think about the characteristics of supportive human relationships, and most reflect actions and characteristics that have been identified by other researchers as well (e.g., Donlan, McDermott & Zaff, 2017; Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017). What is illuminating, is the way that these factors are nurtured, both intentionally and unintentionally, by youth and adults within their day to day interactions.

Shared time and space is a key foundation for fostering the growth of NMRs. Yet it is not enough. Adults intentionally using the time they have with youth to build their relationships, seemed to support the development of other factors, such as trust and closeness, that in turn catalyzed relationships. This intentionality is reflective of past studies of youth-staff relationships at after-school centers (Hirsch, 2005; Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011) which found that unstructured time could be used beneficially for fostering NMRs between staff and youth and that an explicit focus by the adults on positive youth development appeared to support that.

Whereas sharing physical time and space was important, some youth also talked about what we came to call *psychological time and space* – the sense that the adult is there for them even when they are not physically present. This has strong foundations in the idea of secure attachment (Bowlby, 1969). The child's sense of an adult as a secure base allows the child to go out into the world and explore, because they trust that the adult will be there when they need them (Ainsworth, 1973). The idea of their VIP "being there" for them even when not physically present seems to reflect this internal working model of relationships as stable and secure. This sense of psychological time and space could support the continuation of relationships over key transitions and potential disruptions (e.g., graduating high school, moving).

Trust was a common theme across youth's descriptions of what made their VIP relationships important. Trust has long been hypothesized by researchers to be a characteristic of



the kind of close relationships that can best promote positive outcomes in mentoring (Rhodes, Keller, Spencer, Liang, & Noam, 2006) and youth have also identified trust as a key quality of natural mentoring relationships (e.g., Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott Jr, & Tracy, 2010). In a study of youth development programs, Griffith and Larson (2016) found that youth's trust in program staff bolstered the benefits of the program, in part by increasing the youth's use of the staff as mentors. Further, Griffith and Johnson (2019) found that adult staff at youth programs purposefully built trust in ways that reflect many of our findings: respecting youth, building rapport with youth, being consistent in their presence in youth's lives, and occupying what they call a "nuanced role" in youth's lives, reflecting some of the peer-adult boundary crossing that we found as well. From the youth's perspectives, Griffith, Larson, & Johnson (2018) found that youth talked about three types of experiences with staff which contributed to the growth of trust: 1) staff supporting youth's work on specific projects; 2) staff recognizing youth as having needs and interests beyond the program, and; 3) youth watching staff actions over time. This is similar to findings by Donlan, McDermott & Zaff (2017) that trust in natural mentoring relationships between youth and staff in youth programs is fostered by key processes including respect, support, consistency, and information gathering and that these processes also promote youth outcomes. Prior findings from our larger study (reference blinded for review) revealed that trust was emphasized particularly by youth who were more anxious and/or avoidant in their relationships. Thus, trust may be a foundational quality of NMRs, but for youth who feel less secure in their relationships generally, trust may take on an especially important role. Trust, and particularly bi-directional trust, also reflects the concept of *mutuality* within the relationships (Lester, Goodloe, Johnson, & Deutsch, 2018; Rhodes, 2005), which has been identified by others as an important aspect of formal mentoring relationships.

The VIPs in our study were able to create safe and authentic spaces for the young people with whom they interacted. These spaces were characterized by a lack of judgment, listening to youth, and noticing and acknowledging youth's needs. This sense of noticing and responding to youth's needs was also found in a prior study from this larger project, focused on those VIPs who were teachers (reference blinded for review). The adult's validating the youth and recognizing and accepting the youth's true selves was part of this safe and authentic space, and feels linked to adolescence as a developmental period, when youth are solidifying their sense of identity and place in the world (NASEM, 2019). These actions that adults took to foster safe and authentic spaces reflect many of the actions in the Developmental Relationships frame (Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017). Being dependable, listening, and believing in, empowering and respecting youth are all actions identified as expressing different elements of developmental relationships. These same actions are reported by the youth in our study as contributing to a sense of safety with adults within which they can be their "true selves." Thus, it may be that when various elements of developmental relationships are present together, the relationship can serve as a developmentally promotive space for self and identity.

Another component of the safe and authentic spaces was the peer-like features of some of the VIP relationships. This idea of VIPs treating youth like adults or acting more like peers, has been identified by researchers studying out-of-school time organizations (Hirsch, 2005), one potential source of NMRs. The salience of peer-like features may also be connected to individual youth's needs for particular types of support from NMRs. Other findings suggest that young people may seek out or be drawn to particular types of supportive adult relationships (e.g, friend-like, parent-like) to complement or supplement their existing networks (reference blinded for review). It is important to think about the match between the individual youth and the NMR in a

similar way that we think about the match between individual youth's developmental needs and settings (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Mac Iver, 1993). Thus, some aspects of NMRs may be more important to some youth than others.

Within the themes of both trust and safe and authentic spaces, respect emerged as a factor that was important to some participants. As with trust, respect has been found to be important in other youth-adult relationships, including NMRs (Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott Jr, & Tracy, 2010). According to relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976), respect is a core aspect of developmentally promotive relationships. Respect is also included as an aspect of sharing power within the Search Institute's Developmental Relationships framework (Roehlkepartain, Pikel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017). Donlan and colleagues (Donlan, McDermott & Zaff, 2017) found respect to be a key aspect of relational development between mentors and mentees in study of youth development programs, as well. Finally, respect may also distinguish some youth's experiences of relationships with adults across different contexts (e.g., afterschool programs and schools; Deutsch & Jones, 2008), suggesting that respect, and particularly the need for young people to feel respected by adults, may be an important component of relationships.

Although many of the NMRs in our study existed in a single context, there were some that spanned microsystems, operating in what Bronfenbrenner (1979) termed the mesosystem, or the interaction of two microsystems. This included teachers who went to a youth's church, or youth group leaders who became friends with the youth's parents. Increasingly researchers are emphasizing the importance of understanding youth's dyadic relationships within the ecology of their lives (Varga & Zaff, 2018). Relationships that exist within a single microsystem can still be significant, but the psychological sense of these relationships existing in a mesosystem, i.e., the adult's knowledge of the youth's life outside that microsystem, can also foster the relationship.

Further, previous research has documented that having more supportive relationships across different environments is beneficial for youth (Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Although this was not the focus of this paper, the fact that youth who reported limiting what they talked to one of their VIPs about tended to have extensive support networks and multiple VIPs, suggests that it is important to better understand the ways in which young people activate different relationships within their networks to meet different needs (see reference blinded for initial discussion of this idea).

### **Limitations**

The findings from this study, as all research findings, have limitations. We do not know how generalizable or transferable our results are. The sample is small and selective. The youth in our study are majority White, from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, and from one geographic region within the United States. There is likely a fair amount of variability in terms of types of NMRs and differences in how they are formed across contexts, and our sample only captures a small subset of that variation. In addition, for this analysis we relied solely on the youth report of their relationships. While this is important, as youth perceptions can drive outcomes (Sterrett et al., 2011), it is also limiting. Future research should triangulate youth's reports of relational characteristics with those of their natural mentors.

### **Implications**

The importance of time and space in both the initiation and maintenance of these relationships was evident across the NMRs in our study. Yet two points are critical to bear in mind when considering the implications of these findings for adults who work with youth, regardless of the setting. First, the presence of time and space alone does not guarantee the development of NMRs. Rather, the adults and youth intentionally using shared time and space to

engage in activities and conversations that build the relationship is key. In addition, adults creating safe and authentic spaces and nurturing trust with youth appears to be critical. Thus, intentionality is important. It also means that settings in which youth and adults naturally interact, such as schools, afterschool programs, and faith-based youth groups, among others, should not see relational development as wasted time. Rather, having some opportunity for adults and youth to engage in conversations that provide a context for getting to know one another and build trust can foster the development of NMRs (see Hirsch, 2005).

Second, we should not confuse physical availability of adults with relational access to adults. Adults are present in youth's lives in a number of settings, including schools, afterschool activities, religious and faith-based contexts, work places, and family networks. And whereas all youth may have adults who are *available* to them in some or all of these settings, that does not mean that youth *experience equal access* to these adults. Social positionality can affect the access that youth perceive to these adults. For example, first generation college students and students from racially marginalized backgrounds on campuses are less likely to reach out to and form relationships with faculty (see Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016) despite technically having the same *availability* to those relationships as their peers. This points to the importance of the broader climate in which youth and adults are embedded and the need for settings and institutions in which youth and adults interact to consider the ways in which they can create climates in which all young people have not only equal availability but also experience equal access to potentially supportive relationships with adults.

Finally, schools, youth programs, and even families could work to ensure that youth have the opportunity to experience at least one adult across multiple roles or contexts. This does not require that adults in these settings operate across distinct microsystems outside of the setting,

although that appears to be an ingredient that can foster relationships when it is present. But it may be useful for adults to occupy multiple roles in youth's lives even within a single setting (such as a coach for a school team who is also a teacher). This allows for a more complete picture of the youth. In fact, this was one of the features of comprehensive youth development programs that Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois (2011) saw as potentially beneficial for promoting relationships between adults and youth that could in turn promote positive youth development.

### **Conclusions**

Adults play a critical role in supporting the positive development of youth. Yet whereas adolescents may have access to a number of adults across the daily settings of their lives, those relationships do not always develop into the kind of significant relationships -- natural mentoring relationships -- that can best support and foster youth's capacities. Findings from our study suggest that there are strategies adults can use to initiate and sustain positive relationships with adolescents, and that youth will not only respond to such attempts but also sometimes initiate them as well. By intentionally using time and space with youth as an opportunity to cultivate safe and authentic spaces and build trust, adults can encourage the development of supportive developmental relationships with adolescents. Further, settings such as schools, youth programs, and faith-based organizations can facilitate this by acknowledging relationship development as an important aspect of adults' roles and by offering opportunities for adults to get to know youth across multiple contexts. Adults often feel as if teens are turning away from them to their peers, but our study suggests that when adults demonstrate trust, respect, and interest, and take the time to invest, youth will respond.

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